The Brief Guide To Bucket Lists

(And Other Bad Advice)

by

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Key:

INT. = Interior setting
EXT. = Exterior setting
FADE IN.

INT. DORM ROOM - 2:04 AM

I woke up one night recently with a deadly sharp pain in my side, the kind that most people only get mildly concerned about, but that neurotic people take as a death sentence. I fall gracefully into the latter category.

What felt like ages ago, I’d heard my dad’s story about his appendicitis, and narrowly avoiding death by getting help just in time. Maybe I’m remembering that wrong. Okay, I’m definitely remembering that more dramatically that it really was. But in that moment, reality didn’t really matter. All I could think about was the possibility, and that was enough to get me on WebMD.

WebMD is like crack for nervous people. It’s endless pages on complications and rare diseases amply feed the fires of obsession and jack “what if’s” up on steroids. I scrolled through the article, every painful adjective and pessimistic preposition sticking knives in my gut. Finally I reached the Holy Grail: the prognosis page. There were a few paragraphs that used phrases like, “in most cases” and “normally”, which of course I skipped over hurriedly. Then my eyes spotted the words, “in rare instances”, and I stopped and read every word as slowly as I possibly could.

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I’ve almost died three times in my life. The first was when I was three, and I nearly drowned in my pool. The second time, my dad’s car barely avoided sliding into ongoing traffic when snow had left the streets slicked. And just two years ago I was one wrong step away from falling two-hundred feet off the edge of a rain-soaked cliff while hiking.

One of my biggest fears has always been dying in a really stupid way, like tripping down stairs and breaking my neck, or taking too many pain killers and burning a hole in my stomach, just anything highly preventable. There’s something incredibly self-defeating in going out like that for me, maybe because I thought I’d only ever die doing something heroic, being really old or in an apocalyptic extinction. This certainly wouldn’t be one of those.

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INT. DORM ROOM - 2:21 AM

“This can lead to....that can be fatal unless it is treated quickly”
My stomach exploded. No I mean, that’s what I was worried about of course, but I mean like figuratively. I felt like that, you know, I was really scared, but it didn’t actually. And since I’m writing this now you can surely assume that it never did. If you’ll indulge me, however, I’m just going to act like I don’t already know that.

I called a cab as soon as I found the address for the nearest hospital and rushed down the nine flights of stairs to the main level of my quad. I walked briskly on the stone pathway towards the parking lot, nervously glancing at the sparing few people I saw around me.

They don’t even know why I’m walking so strange, I thought. I could double over and die right now and they might just think I’m drunk. This is what I get for going to a public school.

The steps leading to the parking lot were soaked in moonlight and only a handful of people were in my entire range of view. I had gotten a conservative time estimate from the cab company, so I took a deep breath and began the longest eight minute wait of my life.

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The process of your life flashing before your eyes is a lot less like watching a bunch of mental snapshots flicker through your head, and much more of a process of figuring out what things you can cross off your bucket list (if you have one) and what items you missed. This may not be the case with everyone, but it was certainly the first thing on my mind. I’ve had various lists at different times in my life, each succinctly capturing my mind state at the time. For example, here’s my list from when I was ten:

1. Write a book.
2. Find “The One”.
3. Wife, house, 2.5 kids.
4. Go to space.
5. Save planet.

And here it is one year later:

1. Sex.
2. Women.
3. Sex with women.
4. Any activity that involves women, sex or both.
5. Find out what sex is (and how women work).

Understandably, these kinds of lists can be subject to change just about as often as we change as people, so they aren’t the best metric for one’s whole life. Nonetheless there are many common running themes and with a bit of work, a more accurate and holistic list arises:

1. Achieve relationship stuff (includes any of the following, but is not limited to: 1) get a female friend who you respect and treat well,
2) conduct successful flirting, 3) achieve friend zone status, 4) find girlfriend, 5) reach any of the bases, 6) navigate gender politics.

2. Overcome fears (i.e: 1) heights, 2) the planetary weight of depression, 3) the void).

3. Achieve social goals (includes any of the following, but is not limited to: 1) attend a party, 2) perform in public, 3) talk to woman at party, 4) dance at party/in public, 5) talk to stranger, 6) make more real friends.)

4. Be a real person.

5. Don’t fail.

Naturally I attempted to tackle them in chronological order.

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CHAPTER 1: RELATIONSHIPS

INT. LIBERTY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - [2005-2008]

Since second grade I’d had a toxic crush on a girl who outclassed me on several fronts, but thankfully I wouldn’t do anything about it until I was clumsy enough to embarrass myself in front of a room full of my classmates. Her name was Megan Sneed, which I will always remember because I painted her initials next to mine in a toy sailboat that I put together and then quickly hid for several years.

Three years later, we were again in the same class, and our teacher had us reading one of my personal favorite books, “There’s A Boy In The Girl’s Bathroom”. Each of us would have a part to read aloud, which was not normally something I was comfortable with, but I made an exception this time. I’d read ahead a few chapters and saw that there were two characters who really intrigued me, Bartholomew and Ronnie, two toys that the main character imagined to be alive and played out elaborate fantasy adventures with. After Bartholomew saved Ronnie from a villain’s grasp, they passionately kissed. I smiled as a bad idea crept into my brain and started sounding like a very good idea. When parts were being chosen, I waited until the smaller parts were being given and promptly raised my hand for Bartholomew. I noticed that Megan also hadn’t picked one of the bigger roles, so as the Fate’s would have it, Ronnie’s name was called and she modestly raised her hand. I smiled with mischievous contentment.

Apparently no one else had read ahead, as evidenced by a lack of immature giggling. For several magical minutes I sat in ecstatic anticipation, frequently stealing glances to glimpse Megan’s unsuspect-
ing face. Then the paragraph came. I said my line almost too confi-
dently. She replied and turned Communist Manifesto red. There was a
flood of laughter.

I attempted to ride this wave of confidence and pseudo-(but defi-
nitely not romantic and definitely one way)-romantic tension and began
the time honored practice of “bothering someone and be slightly mean
to them because you like them”. This is not to suggest that she gave
me any sign of genuine interest, other than the fact that she couldn’t
stand my presence. In another rare moment of brashness, I was talking
to her and I implied with the subtlety of an atomic bomb that she was
only annoyed with me because she liked me. Being that I had a non-ex-
istent social IQ at the time, I blithely interpreted her rage as em-
barrassment, and therefore validation of my theory.

This was the starting point for all my subsequent relationships,
which might imply that things could only improve. As if.

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EXT. ZACH’S BIRTHDAY PARTY - 6:51 PM

The closest I’ve ever come to going on a date was in eight grade.
It occurred in that weird phase when I felt obligated to invite girls
to my parties and they felt they had to come, so it was all kind of a
miracle. As people were leaving I saw that two girls, Evelyn and
Alexus, were standing in my driveway waiting for a ride and I figured
I would never have another opportunity to talk to them without being
ignored, so I bit up an irrationally large amount of nerve and asked
if they wanted to see a movie next Friday. With sincere smiles and
slightly less sincere enthusiasm they said yes.

The reality of the situation slowly hit me over the course of the
next few days and I realized that I probably wouldn’t fare well trying
to keep a conversation going with two girls I hardly knew and felt im-
mensely intimidated by. I eventually caved and asked two of my guy
friends to come too: Ano, who the girls knew very well, and Daniel,
who existed in a different social circle, but who I could crack jokes
with endlessly. All this comforted me quite a bit, and I figured that
even in the worst circumstance the movie would wash a good deal of the
awkwardness away.

My hope was violently ripped to shreds within minutes, as my fear
of saying something stupid outweighed my genuine interest in talking
to these girls and Ano ended up chatting them up the whole time, while
me and Daniel made fun of all the people walking around us in the
mall. I don’t remember too much else about that night, which is proba-
bly due to my brain repressing it in order to save retrospective emo-
tional pain. Thankfully, however, I would soon find a solution to my
lacking social skills.
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INT. NYACK HIGH SCHOOL - 2013

Sometime around tenth grade I got stuck in my brain the notion that staring at women was a great way to impress them. It’s something that I learn from watching all the wrong romantic comedies (see “The Fault In Our Stars” and “Stuck In Love”), which I must admit account for much of my knowledge in general. My friend Johanna had taught me the virtues of staring into someone’s eyes as a way of getting closer to them, something that Melissa Febos’ memoir affirmed for me. My efforts was less body focused, and much more about the eyes, though I’m not sure that makes it any better. It started small, just a prolonged stolen glance here and there, but pretty soon I was spending large chunks of my history class gawking at any girl in my field of view.

As far as I know I never got caught, but I assume that I drew a lot of suspicion. Since I was too nervous to consistently be good at making small talk, at the I time I thought this would be a good substitute. In fact, I truly believed that I was more sophisticated and genuine than most of the people who chased these girls, so staring was a way of showing that I had more substance to offer. I’ve since decided to reserve this practice for people I actually know and who are interested, but it remains a relic of my past romantic life.

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INT. ZACH’S LIVING ROOM - 6:38 PM

One day I was texting with this girl Alma, who I only really knew through a mutual friend, but who I had a serious thing for. We’d stumbled through a few conversations in the past, so texting naturally arose as the most efficient mode of communication. However, when you’re a perfectionist, texting can be hell, when you feel compelled to spend five minutes refining each text to be the perfect combination of funny, self-aware, intelligent, accessible and mysterious. The process is easier when talking with someone you’re comfortable with, so this was always incredibly difficult.

We’d been talking for a few minutes and I forget what she brought up, but it was something I actually found really interesting, so I replied with something to the effect of, “Wow, that’s really cool. You’re so much more interesting than most of the people I talk to.” This is the kind of compliment I toss out as often as I can, mostly because it’s very true and also because people have told me that they’re not sure when I’m being serious, so I like to make myself very clear.

I sat for a few minutes flipping through my other messages when a fateful “ding” rang out.

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MESSAGE FROM: ALMA

ARE YOU HITTING ON ME?

My heart broke for a second, before I started the laugh hysterically, blurring the lines between deep embarrassment, hilarity and insanity.

MESSAGE FROM: ZACH

No, oh jesus sorry. No I just sound kinda flirtatious when I get interested in something. My bad if that made you uncomfortable or whatever.

And, yeah I totally was and of course she brushed it off, but things were very weird after that and we didn’t talk much afterword. This is this the only attempt I’ve ever had at flirting.

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INT. ZACH’S DAD’S HOUSE - 2:15 PM

When I was fifteen, only a few months later, I sat on a shoddy living room couch and took a deep breath before breaking off a friendship with a person who hadn’t really done much to deserve it. I didn’t consider this at the time, as I was more concerned with being self-righteous and trying to save this girl from her own fatal faults. For the past few months she’d been in an on-off relationship with another lovely girl who had, to say the least, some baggage from her past. A boyfriend of hers emotional abused her and for the most part she continued to be very well-adjusted, but she still projected a bunch of her issues and participated in typical jealous and manipulative girlfriend behavior. I eventually decided that, as her designated guardian savior, it was my job to make my disapproval of her relationship known by avoiding all contact with her.

At the time I thought this was a valiant idea, probably due to my aforementioned taste in romantic comedies, where people often have the notion that they should try to save their loved ones from their emotional problems. But the thing that these movies leave out is the fact that trying to fix someone else’s problems usually leaves you with just as many emotional scars as them. I accumulated several months
worth of bad karma after starting the avoidance of my friend by regularly spiting her. And while we’ve since made up and put this behind us, I wasted a lot of time and caused a lot of sadness, just to learn an unnecessary lesson about inheriting another person’s baggage.

Completion Grade: 0/6 = 0%

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CHAPTER 2: FEARS

INT. ZACH’S BEDROOM - 10:01 PM

I remember the first time I thought of what happens after death, When I was about seven. I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling trying to calm my nerves about dying. I felt insignificant for the first time, imagining the millions of possibilities of where I might go or if I would just descend into an infinite darkness, to exist in silence until the end of eternity. Even worse, I sometimes thought, I could be reincarnated perpetually, but always forget my past life and end up making all the same mistakes again and again. I think that’s just a big fear I have in general, waking up one morning in twenty years and still be making the same mistakes.

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EXT. ROUTE 9W - 2:36 PM

I’ve always had some amount of a fear of heights, exacerbated acutely any time that I ever approach an area far above ground. So I decided the best way to get over this was to hike a small mountain and hang off the side of a eighty degree cliffside in the rain.

My grandpa gave me a fair share of strange looks as he drove me to my destination and lingered a bit after I got out of the car on the side of the road where the trail began. It took no time at all the reach the summit, about two-hundred feet above the highway below. I had a magnificent view of the Hudson river, but a thick fog was slowly beginning to impede my vision out into the distance.

I strolled over to where the face of the rock took a sharp dive and became nearly vertical. There were several trees and large rocks which I could hold onto, but there wouldn’t be much to stop me from ending up in a hospital or in highway traffic if I slipped. With more caution that I thought possible to command, I made my way step by step down the mountainside, grasping every tree for dear life. Before long I was about twenty-five feet down, sitting on a wet protruding rock listening to a Frank Ocean record, trying desperately to calm myself down. I’d heard that the best way to get over fears was to put yourself in that situation and get used to feeling fear and associate it with being calm.
I sat there a while and eventually decided I’d had enough. Glancing at the path behind me I realized I would to plan each step before I took it, lest I end up stranded on a rock. Bit by bit I made it back up, and I ran up the last part. By now the fog had cleared some and I could see the Tappan Zee Bridge, majestically splayed across the Hudson. I make plans to do this again in many more places, but the more immediate allure of apathy overcame my interests in growing as a person and I’d soon forgotten all about it.

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INT. ZACH’S BEDROOM - 12:29 AM

On one of my weirder ventures through the dark depths of the internet, I found a quiet little masterpiece known as “Depression Quest”, an independent interactive fiction game. It employs a deceptively simple premise, kind of a “choose your own adventure” story, but one that puts you in the perspective of a troubled twenty-something with depression and guides you through the seasons of her life. First the player learns about the main character’s life, which includes a soul-crushing job, a superficially supportive yet judgmental family, a girlfriend who tries her best to save you from your reclusive and destructive habits, a social circle with whom you interact sparingly and the aforementioned case of depression that renders you with no energy, little motivation and a literally diminished capacity to make good decisions. At the end of each level, you’re given a list of actions you can take, ranging from the most lazy and least helpful to the kind of productive, good advice that a therapist would give. The problem is that each time, the choice you really want to take, the one that would almost definitely have a positive effect on your situation, is unavailable, left ominously crossed out on the list in order to drive home what depression actually feels like.

Wandering through this game was both a very scary and comforting experience. I came to realize that other people might be feeling the intense hopelessness expressed by the main character and it was tragic to think that the smallest poor choices could leave someone so stagnant and alone. But it also shows exactly what it feels like to be excessively sad all the time, and to feel dejected when people tell you that they understand, even when it’s evident that they don’t. It was helpful to know that at least one indie game developer out there knows what it’s like to be like me, even just a little. And it reminds me that I can write about sometime that’s happening and not have it feel like a strange story I tell about someone else.

Completion Grade: 0/3 = 0%

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CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL
INT. ZACH’S GARAGE - 8:00 PM

When I was in middle school, I started to listen to a lot of actually good music, much of which was I was put onto by my guitar teachers. All of this fueled my musical ambitions, which are always gigantic and impossible at that age. But my skills were a least decent, and my previously mentioned partner in crime Ano also played guitar, so it was inevitable that we would start a band. That was exciting enough for me at the time, but Ano always had more expansive and less practical visions than I did. So before long he announced that we would be having a short concert in my garage on Halloween, with a very exclusive guest list consisting mostly of girls Ano had a thing for.

By 7:59 I was drenched in sweat, which is telling for the time of year. My parents had a camera set up and somewhere in the ether there’s video of all this. We had planned four songs, by which I mean that I had been practicing them the whole the day and Ano just decided that he would wing it. The first song we played, which seriously wasn’t bad, was a huge hit. This was great because we ended up forgetting two of the other ones, so we just played it again. All things considered it went pretty well and my bashfulness was overshadowed by the sheer gall it took to even put myself in this situation.

This will always be one of the stories that I tell on dates in hopes to impress someone, of which there aren’t too many.

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INT. ZACH’S BASEMENT - 1:13 AM

My friend Ano has always been something of an enigma, as well as a window in the world of promiscuity and heathenry that the suburbs hide. A typical Friday night for him involved any number of combinations of pot, deafening levels of Trinidad James music, hot pants, fire and mischief. A typical Friday night for me involved receiving texts and pictures of whatever party Ano was at, which would leave me amused, jealous, inspired, aroused and confused all at once. They were great fodder for screenshots, but would always make me wonder what I was doing home on nights like these.

I would be sitting in my basement trekking through Wikipedia articles at 1:00 AM and I’d get a video in my inbox of some girl shaking her ass in some other dude’s face, while Ano mumbled indecipherable drunk wisdom. Hours later he would stumble back to my house, reeking of sin and cocoa butter, and pass out on my couch, only to miraculously be gone by morning. I never believed most of the stories that he told me and I learned to be skeptical of everything that came out of his mouth.
Needless to say, I never ended up going to any of these parties, but I also can’t help feeling left out, even when it’s from something that would probably disgust me if I got to experience it in person.

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INT. ZACH’S DAD’S HOUSE - 7:50 PM

I’ve always enjoyed dancing, the same way that rich kids enjoy rapping: not being talented enough to want to do it in public, but still having fun with it alone in their room. Especially with hip hop, if you’re not pretty good at it, then you look absolutely ridiculous just flailing your arms and legs about. I planned on getting good at it at some point, as I always thought I would one day go skydiving or learn Mandarin.

I finally got off my ass about it when I heard this Chris Brown song, “Fine China”, which I’m sure would inspire even the laziest among us to bust a move. The only other dancing I’d done recently was with the two girls I mentioned earlier. Johanna had tried to teach us salsa, which she was naturally a pro at, so when I told her I wanted to show her this dance I’d been practicing, she was ecstatic.

One fall afternoon, I stopped by my dad’s house where she was staying and hooked up to the sound system. I paced in anticipation for the beat to drop. For all my self-deprecating tendencies, I kinda killed it. I wish I’d gotten it on tape, if only to have proof that it actually happened. Oh well. I’ll count it as half a point.

Completion Grade:  1.5/6 = 25%

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CHAPTER 4: REAL PERSON

EXT. UALBANY CAMPUS - 10:15 AM

I, like many of my generation, have progressed from nineties rebelliousness and arthouse pretentiousness to mumblecore sentimentality and manic, pseudo-sophisticated sensibilities. In plain terms I’m sensible genuine on the inside, but I can only communicate through sarcasm and intelligent sounding nonsense, all of which serve as a substitute for honesty and really just being a real person.

At orientation I met a quiet soul named Sharon, who is short enough to be mistaken for a fifth grader and hardly what you would think of when you hear “art student from Manhattan”, but is nonetheless a force of nature. In one of many monotonous groups meetings, I spied her sketching aimlessly in the seat next to me and did what all slightly self-loathing introverts have a bad habit of doing: fell hopelessly enamored. Some time later in the day I worked up the nerve
to make some small talk, mostly about her high school and tastes in movies.

We talked for the rest of the day, exchanging awkward fragments of ideas whenever we had the chance. She smiled a great deal and laughed often, which are two things that instantly sell me on anyone that I meet, but she also inquired with serious interest when I gave vague or incomplete answers to her simple questions. We would be discussing our tastes in women (she’s straight as the letter “S”) and I would say something out of the ordinary, mostly so that she would have to wonder what I meant and would become curious about the mysterious and peculiar guy she’d just met.

I can’t say that this is all something I invented. Browsing through any of books on “Young Adult” shelved around the world, one would find many similar examples, purposefully underachieving introverts who stumble across manic pixie dream girls and attempt to charm them with the weird and unconventional anecdotes they keep in their back pockets. Usually it takes getting to know me for me to get past this, so it’s sometimes hard to tell who really knows what I’m like.

Completion Grade: 0/1 = 0%

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CHAPTER 5: DON’T FAIL

EXT. OLD NYACK HIGH SCHOOL - 4:59 PM

On a sweaty afternoon I stood towards the back of a long line at my graduation practice, brimming with nostalgia but wondering about what we’d all been doing for the past four years. It seemed like every year my friends and I would always talk about the reasons we didn’t want to do things, or what our guidance counselors told us we should be doing to impress colleges later on.

Not to sound like a John Green novel, but I’ve found that too few people seem to really care about anything that would impact them or the world, beyond next Friday’s party or Saturday’s football game. And maybe it’s not that they don’t. I’m sure the everyone cares about something, has passions and ambitions for the future past the next week. But the way that many of us were brought up did little to support the idea that we were okay just as ourselves, and that we had to be just like our hard working parents if we wanted to be happy, even if that meant making all of the mistakes that they made in the process.

So it was bittersweet walking across the stage the following evening, looking out into a crowd of people I really liked, but seemed like they never had the chance to be themselves or the people they really wanted to be. And neither did I, maybe. I’d always known that
high school would end, but I wonder if we’ll ever take those chances that we’ve gotten so scared of.

Completion Grade: 0/1 = 0%

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Final calculations: 1.5/17 = 8.82%

A- 90-100%
B- 80-90%
C- 70-80%
D- 65-70%
F- < 60%

Final grade = F

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INT. ALBANY MEDICAL CENTER E.R. - 12:05 PM

"Yeah so, we’re gonna take it out just to be safe, but you’re actually in pretty good shape.
We should have you out of here by tomorrow."

I sat there on my hospital bed with a mix of relief, pain and chilling despondence. I’d never really thought I was in any danger, but the tiniest fear that lingered in me died just at that moment. It had been about nine hours since I’d gotten there, and in all that time, I’d only managed to make myself feel completely obsolete.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a violent cough. I turned my head and saw a group of EMT’s moving a stretcher down the hallway I was in, one which was a older man. I tried not to listen to what the nurses were saying about him, but I caught a few glimpses, which told me that he wasn’t in great shape. Then I looked around at all the people in my vicinity.

Statistics say that at least one of them won’t make it out of here. Won’t get a chance to send dumb birthday cards to their nieces and nephews. Won’t get to eat Thanksgiving dinner or visit Mecca one day. Won’t go back to normal life in a few days.

I realized that we waste an insane amount of our lives chasing the things that we think will make us happy, and then we end up missing the magical things about every day. The magical, stupid, naive things we do.

I’ll never forget making dumb movies in film class or writing songs that my friend told me he really connected with. I’ll never forget watching sunsets or lying in the middle of the road looking up at
clouds. I’ll always remember the times I got to teach someone something real, or help them figure out something about themselves. And I’ll never forget getting to watch old movies with my family, and laughing at how racist they are.

I remembered going to great shows and being a part of a community of people who just wanted to come together and celebrate good music and theatre. All the times I saw people smile, got to make people laugh at crazy stories and marvel at tales of adventures. A couple times I might have ever grown up a bit.

We can’t just measure our lives by all the expectations that we had for ourselves, or by the things we can put on a resume, much less vain achievements or fleeting metrics of manhood or womanhood. If I’ve learned anything from watching musical theatre, it’s that everything is really much simpler than that.

So I forgot my lists, favoring of an alternative. And in this case, I will differ to the wisdom of Jonathan Larson:

**Things to dos before you die:**

1. Measure your life in love.

FADE TO BLACK.